

**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**  
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**THESIS**

**POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN EURASIA:  
RADICAL ISLAM OR RATIONAL ACTING?**

by

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December 2000

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RADICAL ISLAM OR RATIONAL ACTING?**

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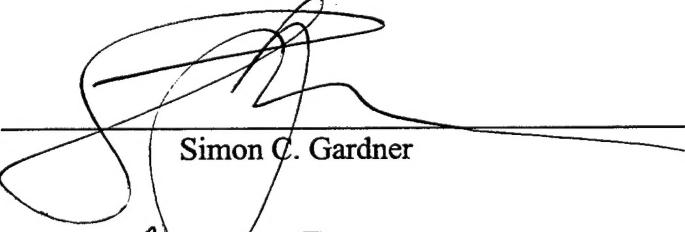
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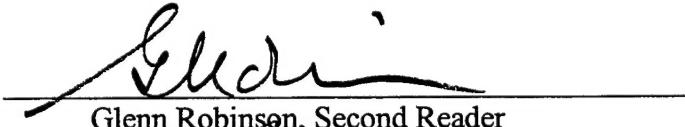
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## **ABSTRACT**

Much of the violence in Eurasia since the break-up of the Soviet Union has been blamed purely on radical Islamic fundamentalism. This characterization is at best simplistic and at worst dangerously insufficient. Not understanding the underlying causes of violence in this volatile region will marginalize the efforts of both American diplomats and soldiers to help to prevent future political violence through engagement agendas and in their failure to do so execute post-conflict operations.

It is widely accepted that the potential for political violence across Eurasia is high. Given the complicated array of human divisions and mobilizing institutions that exist there, lessons learned from past or present conflicts might be insufficient to craft meaningful engagement and post-conflict strategies.

This thesis attempts to provide a framework to better understand the complex socio-political underpinnings of society. It will attempt to dispel the popular notion that the preponderance of regional violence is purely predicated on Islamic fanaticism and postulate that the true causes are instead, more rational and political. It will emphasize the divides and allegiances at the local levels where policymakers will influence populations and soldiers and humanitarians will assist in the rebuilding of broken institutions and infrastructure in the aftermath of political violence.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. BACKGROUND

Professor Samuel Huntington posits in his seminal work The Clash of Civilizations, that the biggest threat to world stability after the fall of the Soviet Union continues to be bipolar in nature. He argues that instead of the West facing off against the Soviet bloc countries, as evidenced by the Cold War, now the primary struggle for survival will pit Western civilization against the Eastern civilizations.<sup>1</sup> His dogmatic views have stirred many opposing and supporting views across a wide range of disciplines. In his treatise, he warns of the rise of Islam as the greatest threat to the West. Many Westerners both in and out of government appear to share his views with respect to the threat of Islam. This is constantly reinforced by both the media and by governmental information appariti.

There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that radical Islamic fundamentalism is indeed a serious threat to states and populations. There is certainly sufficient evidence to support the notion that much of the world's violence has been carried out in the name of Allah. Ted Gurr contends that of fifty ethno-political conflicts in the two-year period

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations: Remaking of World Order*, (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 8.

between 1994 and 1995, twenty-six involved Moslem participants.<sup>2</sup> However, this viewpoint must be researched and thoroughly argued before any assertion can be made that the "Green Menace" of Islam will replace the "Red Menace" of Communism as the primary threat to world peace.

There is evidence that other more rational motives exist that have ignited political violence in Muslim regions. Islam is indeed a superb mobilizing force and an effective organizer of disaffected populations, rivaled in history perhaps only by socialism. It is important however, to be able to distinguish between conflicts genuinely caused by a desire to establish an Islamic state under Shari'a law, as opposed to violence propagated by politically motivated entrepreneurs using Islam for the sole purpose of unifying, mobilizing, and organizing a broader based disaffected constituency.

Religion, and notably, Islam, is arguably the most capable force to mobilize a population of Moslems to commit significant political violence. However, mobilizing factors such as religion, ethnicity, class, or nationalism, are parts of a larger formula equating to large-scale organized violence. Ted Gurr and Barbara Harff state that it is a mobilizing factor added to an opportunity that yields violence.<sup>3</sup> Opportunists will often make use of religious or even ethnic differences in

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>3</sup> Ted Gurr and Barbara Harff, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 84.

populations. Early recognition, and subsequent addressing, of these precipitating opportunities should allow diplomats and soldiers to formulate more meaningful and lasting strategies to resolve conflicts and to better shape post-conflict agendas.

## **B. RELEVANCE**

Much of the violence across the Transcaucasus and Central Asia since the break-up of the Soviet Union has been blamed on the enormous revival of Islam. This characterization is often at best simplistic and at worst dangerously insufficient. It is widely accepted that the potential for political violence across Eurasia is high, given the complicated array of human divisions and mobilizing institutions coupled to an endless stream of political and economic opportunities for dissent. Thus, lessons learned from past or present conflicts elsewhere in the world may be insufficient to craft meaningful engagement and post-conflict strategies.

Insufficient appreciation of the true underlying causes of violence in these volatile regions will marginalize the efforts of diplomats and soldiers to help to prevent future political violence through engagement agendas and post-conflict operations.

## **C. METHODOLOGY**

This thesis strives to provide a framework to better understand the complex socio-political underpinnings of those regional societies both susceptible to and those societies already engaged in conflict. It will

attempt to dispel the popular notion that the preponderance of regional violence is purely predicated on true Islamic motivations and will instead postulate that the true causes are more rational and political. The thesis recognizes the immense attraction of Islam as a unifying and mobilizing force but will tend to view this aspect as a “tool in the kitbag” of the political entrepreneur. It will also emphasize the divides and allegiances at the local levels where soldiers and humanitarians will have to work to assist in the rebuilding of broken institutions and infrastructure in the aftermath of political violence.

In an effort to better understand the dynamics of this sort of conflict, this thesis will explore three case studies of political violence during the last decade in Eurasia, namely, the civil war in Tajikistan, the ethnic violence in the Ferghana Valley, and the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh.

## **II. TAJIKISTAN**

### **A. BACKGROUND**

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been a resurgence of Islamic movements throughout the former Central Asian Soviet republics. The popular view is that the fall of the Soviet empire allowed a hitherto repressed Islamism to rise again. Several of these movements have turned violent, threatening the political stability both within the emergent republics and across the region. This instability also concerns those nations bordering the new Central Asian states, most importantly, Russia, Pakistan and China. To date the only one of these Central Asian states to realize significant turmoil has been Tajikistan, which endured a bloody civil war from 1991 to 1996 and exists today in a highly unstable security environment.

But given that the vast majority of people in Central Asia are Muslim, why then, as Moscow and Beijing both feared, has no Central Asian republic, even Tajikistan, the most suspected, chosen to become an Islamic state, perhaps modeled after Iran or Afghanistan? There is some suspicion that the majority of the post-independence political violence is not primarily motivated by Islamic radicalism. This seems plausible given the seventy odd years that Central Asian peoples lived largely secular existences under communism. Consequently, it has been asserted that these movements really result from the secular political entrepreneurship under the guise of Islamic revivalism.

This chapter asks the following question: In the case of Tajikistan, the only Central Asian state to be rent by a full-scale civil war, was the popular resurgence of Islam following the fall of the Soviet empire the primary *causus belli*? Or alternatively, is it more likely that the end of Soviet rule merely allowed a series of opportunistic political entrepreneurs to capitalize on the age old organizing and mobilizing principle of religion?

Even to the careful observer it would seem safe to assume that the post-Soviet era political violence is based primarily on a quick and dramatic upsurge in radical Islamic fundamentalism. As Muriel Atkin surmises:

“A widely heard characterization of the power struggle there was that it was being waged by two diametrically opposed camps: one representing secularism and stability and led for much of the period by the president, Rahman Nabiev (deposed in September 1992); the other representing radical Islamic ‘fundamentalism.’”<sup>1</sup>

It is commonly asserted that the Soviets completely eradicated Islamic practices and devotions in the region during their rule.<sup>2</sup> In reality, Moscow’s anti-religious campaigns in Central Asia were for many reasons, largely ineffective. A 1970 Soviet study acknowledged that 77%

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<sup>1</sup> Muriel Atkin, *The Politics of Polarization in Tajikistan in Central Asia*, ed. Hafeez Malik, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 211.

<sup>2</sup> Haghayeghi Mehrdad, *Islam and Politics in Central Asia* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 37.

of males and 80% of females in the region openly claimed the Muslim faith.<sup>3</sup> Of the five pillars of Islam, only one, the Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca), was effectively denied to the faithful; the authorities only permitted about twenty-five “loyal” Tajik party members to make the trip each year.<sup>4</sup> Although it is true that a large majority of the populace considered themselves Muslim, the above cited study also revealed that of those claiming to be Muslim, less than half prayed daily, about half fasted during Ramadan, and only eleven percent considered themselves to be devout Muslims.<sup>5</sup> Although these figures indicate a low percentage of devout Muslims, Islam within the Soviet Union was certainly not totally suppressed, especially in rural areas and at family gatherings. Even in 1963, during Krushchev’s most severe anti-religious campaigns, about four hundred mosques still openly operated in the Central Asian Soviets and many hundreds more operated more discreetly in homes and village halls.<sup>6</sup>

A second widespread misconception involves the character of Islam in Central Asia. Those who fear a Huntingtonesque Islamic takeover tend

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>4</sup> Muriel Atkin, *The Subtlest Battle: Islam in Soviet Tajikistan* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 1989), 14.

<sup>5</sup> Mehrdad, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 33.

to approach Islam in Central Asia as a monolithic, uniform phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Islamic practices, doctrine, and influences on regional politics vary greatly between each of the new Central Asia republics and within each republic itself; this occurs even at the village level. Many of these differences can be traced to when a particular area first converted to Islam or assumed a Muslim identity, in some regions the difference can be over six hundred years. Some areas subscribe to widely divergent branches of Islam; for example, about 200,000 of the Tajiks in the mountainous Pamiri region are Ismailis of the Shia sect whereas the majority of Tajiks elsewhere are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school. It is obvious that differences at the grass roots level must be taken into consideration in order to rationalize and develop effective policies for the region.

A third popular belief is that Moscow firmly suppressed Islamic dissent and that the widespread adherence to Islamic practices and Islamic political activism is a relatively new phenomenon. This is untrue. Islamic violence erupted during the Stalinist purges of the 1930's and again in 1960-64.<sup>8</sup> The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan raised the level of anti-government sentiment by Muslims to a new peak; it galvanized the Muslim population against the Brezhnev regime.<sup>9</sup> Then, in the 1980s,

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<sup>7</sup> M. Holt Ruffin and Daniel Waugh, ed., *Civil Society in Central Asia*, (New York: Center for Civil Society International, 1999), 161.

<sup>8</sup> Mehrdad, 38.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 39.

thousands of Soviet Tajiks and Uzbeks joined their Muslim brethren, the Afghan Mujahadeen, in their fight against the Soviets. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which ironically sought to preserve communism, served to facilitate contact between the Tajiks living in Afghanistan and those at home in Tajikistan.<sup>10</sup> The unpopular Soviet intervention gave new impetus to an Islamic revival that was well under way as many as twenty years before the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost*.<sup>11</sup>

In actuality, Stalin's exercise of ethno-territorial delimitation remains at the root of most of the troubles for the Tajik populations. Of all the created republics in Central Asia, Tajikistan is the most artificial and least satisfactory.<sup>12</sup>

Of the five new Central Asian republics, Tajikistan has undoubtedly had the roughest transition to statehood. Since its inception as a Soviet in 1924 it has been the poorest economically. It has the least arable land, the fewest minerals and the worst infrastructure.<sup>13</sup> Historically, it suffered horribly under the Russian Empire and under the Soviets, as demonstrated by the removal of its three greatest cultural centers--

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<sup>10</sup> Graham Fuller, *Central Asia: The New Geopolitics*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1992), 64.

<sup>11</sup> Ruffin and Waugh, 165.

<sup>12</sup> Roland Dannreuther, *Creating New States in Central Asia*, (London: Brassey's (UK) Ltd., 1994), 25.

<sup>13</sup> Mohiaddin Meshabi, *Central Asia and the Caucasus after the Soviet Union*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 68.

Bukhara, Samarkand, and Kohjent, which Moscow callously and carelessly placed inside neighboring Uzbekistan, which they favored politically over Tajikistan. This occlusion of their historic cultural centers, along with Stalin's ethnic dilution schemes, contributed to what many scholars claim is a lack of a clear Tajik national identity. Also excluded by Stalin's "state-making" were two-thirds of the ethnic Tajiks who found themselves trapped inside Uzbekistan. These two facts are the basis for today's inter-ethnic tension between the two countries. Additionally, throughout the Stalin and the Khrushchev years, hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russians were "encouraged" to emigrate to Tajikistan. These Russians held the vast majority of the political and technological jobs; they became the social elite of Tajikistan.<sup>14</sup>

This immigration created an ethno-economic hierarchy that, confusingly for the masses, contradicted Soviet claims of equality and homogeneity. The "native" Soviets were relegated almost exclusively, to the lower levels of the social, political, and economic hierarchy. Many, in fact, remained little more than mere fieldworkers in the eyes of the state.

## **B. ETHNICITY AND CLAN REGIONALISM**

Like the other Central Asian states Tajikistan is demographically composed of several ethnic groups. According to a 1996 census,

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<sup>14</sup> Meshabi, 170.

Tajikistan was 62.3% Tajik, 23.5% Uzbek, 7.6% Russian, with the remaining ethnicities ranging from Ukrainian to Korean. Significantly, in the 1924-25 National Delimitation of Central Asia schemes, the Soviets left roughly 37% of titular Tajiks outside of the new republic, mainly in Uzbekistan and Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup>

Tajiks have no tribes, but strongly identify with their home regions, which form the basis for strong clan-like ties based on patron-client relations.<sup>16</sup> Tajikistan's mountainous terrain lends itself to these regional divisions. The main regional divisions that have fostered large clans are: the Kulabi Valley in the south; the Garm areas in the eastern Pamiri mountains; the Leninabad Oblast, in the Ferghana Valley in the north; the Hisor Valley in the west; and the Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast in the southeast.

### C. ISLAM IN TAJIKISTAN

Tajiks are vastly different from their Central Asian neighbors in that they speak Dari, a dialect of Farsi, which is the language spoken in most of Afghanistan and Iran. The majority of Tajiks are Sunni Muslims, adhering to the norms of the Hanifi School, a more flexible, adaptive

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<sup>15</sup> Shirin Akiner, *Central Asia: Conflict or Stability and Development*, (London: Minority Rights Group, 1997), 28.

<sup>16</sup> Barnett Rubin, *Tajikistan: From Soviet Republic to Russian-Uzbek Protectorate*, in Central Asia and the World, ed. Michael Mandelbaum, (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1994), 211.

branch of Islam.<sup>17</sup> However, some clans in the isolated, mountainous Pamiri region are Ismaili or Shia Muslims.

Islam penetrated into what is now Tajikistan in the second half of the seventh century. Over several hundred years, Sufism, a moderate, mystical form of Islam that stressed a balance of moral values and spiritualism, influenced Tajik culture. Sufism stressed the application of cultural values and tradition versus the absolute obedience to Shari'a as in the stricter, literal practices of the more doctrinaire branches of Islam in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan. Sufism, as it was practiced in Tajikistan, was further refined by the influences of a socio-political doctrine called Naqshbandi or, more locally, Khojagon.<sup>18</sup> This "brotherhood" within Sufism expected that the political leaders exercise flexible and careful judgment in the application of Shari'a in order to protect the peasantry. It stressed that Shari'a should not be hard and fast. It moved away from the earlier mysticism of Sufism to a more rational approach that worked to assist the masses. This less strict rendering of the Koran manifests itself in a more rational approach to life at all levels.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Meshabi, 182.

<sup>18</sup> Ruffin and Waugh, 181.

<sup>19</sup> Meshabi, 183.

#### **D. ISLAM UNDER THE SOVIETS**

Despite decades of Soviet secularization, Muslim customs, traditions, and to a lesser extent, devout religious practices, have remained a large part of daily life in Central Asia. Traditions practiced in the home or in social clubs and away from the mosques were particularly widespread. For example, fasting during Ramadan, private and group prayer, and the celebration of Islamic festivals such as Mohammed's birthday, never ceased during the Soviet era. Perhaps the strongest manifestation of Islam's persistence was the adherence to what Muriel Atkin describes as Islamic "life-cycle" rituals. These rites, often involving the local mullahs, were widely observed throughout Tajik society, even by those who claimed not to be very religious. They include traditional Islamic weddings and funerals, the circumcision of infant males, the payment of a brideprice and the wearing by women of a large headscarf year round (the veil was outlawed).<sup>20</sup> To fully understand the causes of political violence in Tajikistan and, indeed, throughout Central Asia and the Transcaucasus region, one must explore a complex array of relationships involving clan, regional, sub-regional, ethnic, economic, and nationalist divisions as well as international relationships.

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<sup>20</sup> Atkin, 14-15.

## **E. ISLAM AND NETWORKS OF POWER**

Significantly, Tajikistan is the only republic of the former Soviet Union where the central communist government permitted regionalism to flourish, even up to the level of government policy.<sup>21</sup> Traditional opposing factions were delineated not necessarily along religious or ethnic lines but according to the region of the country they inhabited. Clan and local loyalties were stronger than any other tied to religion and nationalism. This fact, along with the compounding problem of restrictive mountainous terrain has led to a lack of a clear Tajik national identity.<sup>22</sup> Clan allegiances have also hindered the efficient functioning of the state. Local loyalties have reduced military conscription rates, morale, and performance levels.<sup>23</sup>

The fundamental social unit throughout Central Asia is the *mahallah* or neighborhood association.<sup>24</sup> The mahallah has traditionally provided a social security net, played a key role in religious education,

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<sup>21</sup> Davlat Khudonazar, , *Islam: A Threat to Central Asia?* Retrieved 3 June 2000, from the World Wide Web: <http://www.cpss.org/focus/foc895.txt>, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Dannreuther, 27.

<sup>23</sup> Glenn Curtis, ed., *Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan: Country Studies*, (Washington: Federal Research Division, 1997) . 201.

<sup>24</sup> Anara Tabyshalieva, *The Challenge of Regional Cooperation in Central Asia: Preventing Ethnic Conflict in the Ferghana Valley*, (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 1999), 4.

and helped to establish and enforce social norms. The mahallah, composed normally of the village elders, who often met in teahouses, was in fact well incorporated into the regional political systems. The mahallah lobbied to allow the observance of social and religious traditions and practices, to better the general well-being of communities, and also acted at times as pressure groups which placed specific demands upon the local or governmental bodies. In other words, the mahallah facilitated collective action to address community matters that fell beyond the purview of the official party and thus managed to co-exist nonetheless alongside official government bodies.<sup>25</sup> They acted as civil clubs, youth and religious organizations, economic cooperatives and often even as the local government itself.<sup>26</sup>

The important legacy of these grassroots-level committees is that they permitted Islam to survive Sovietization through a careful nurturing of Islamic values and traditions. Ironically, the Soviet system itself perpetuated these local power structures by passively allowing their existence within a normally intolerant social structure, even actively recognizing some as legally sanctioned functional organizations.

The mahallah remains a strong socio-political entity throughout Central Asia today. In Uzbekistan, for example, the government

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<sup>25</sup> *Non-governmental Organisations of Tajikistan*, Retrieved from the World Wide Web, 16 November 2000: <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/tajikistan/links/ngotajik.html>

<sup>26</sup> Ruffin and Waugh, 166-167.

recognizes over twelve thousand mahallah, and actively uses them to assist in local administrative matters such as welfare programs.<sup>27</sup>

As earlier stated, for centuries the people of Tajikistan were distinguished by regional clan affiliations and organizations, regardless of their ethnic and religious ties to one another and to peoples outside the immediate region. Without question, the Soviet introduction of collective farming, or the *kolkhoz* system, to the region during the 1920s deepened these affiliations and allegiances.

Despite the best efforts of the Soviets to homogenize the population by settling groups into these large collective activities, their institution actually had quite the reverse effect, polarizing communities and strengthening the roles of the mahallahs, clans and extended families. The Soviets organized these farms and related industries along existing local identity groups that already, in most respects, worked and lived "collectively". This economic technique, so commonly used throughout the Soviet world, when implemented in Central Asia tended to reinforce local allegiances, lessening reliance on the state and strengthening existing patronage networks. The *kolkhoz* system's positive effect on the rural patronage networks was not lost on its urban constituency. Even if individuals migrated away from the fields to find work in the cities, they

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 168.

still fell under the protection of their rural kolkhoz and subsequently owed allegiance to it.

Even when the Soviet government forcefully deported segments of the population to other areas under its "divide and rule" policy, Tajiks often resettled under the same social arrangements that they had in their original homeland. This occurred throughout Tajikistan. In fact, deportations of Tajiks within Tajikistan served to strengthen the power of the Tajik kolkhozes through shared hardship in the new and sometimes alien lands, and in competition for resources with the resident "foreign" clans.<sup>28</sup>

The kolkhozes did much more than organize the work force; they represented the core of civil society for the more than two-thirds of the population that inhabited the rural regions. Most importantly, much like its smaller subset, the mahallah, the kolkhoz system provided a working framework for the continuation of extended family and clan networks that emphasized adherence to Muslim traditions and values. Muslim leaders retained their leadership positions of the mahallahs within the kolkhozes.<sup>29</sup>

Kolkhozes themselves, meanwhile often competed with each other for scarce resources like land and water. Two rival kolkhozes, organized

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<sup>28</sup> Ruffin and Waugh, 110-113.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 114.

along regional clan lines eventually fought each other during the 1992 civil war. The Kulabi Kolkhoz, whose members represented a clan derived from the southern Kulab Valley, fought the Gharm Kolkhoz, whose clan originated in the Gharm Valley in the country's northern region. These regional clans had feuded over land and water rights since their incorporation into the Soviet Kolkhoz system in the 1930s.<sup>30</sup>

Further degrading the Soviet socialization plan was the fact that the formation of the official communist party structures also replicated the segmentary pre-existing identity groups.<sup>31</sup> The more dominant clans usually assumed dominant political roles within the communist system. Although the kolkhoz was dependent on the state economically, in terms of domestic management, the state exerted relatively little local authority. The party apparatchiks, who were supposed to play the role of agents of the state, came from the clans and tended to be more loyal to their respective clan than to the central communist government. Additionally, no security forces were stationed within or near most of the kolkhozes.<sup>32</sup> In cities where the kolkhozes were somewhat less influential, the mahallah circumlocuted the Soviet scheme to reorganize urban spaces by

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 114.

simply moving entire clans into large apartment complexes, hence preserving the same social networks in a different locale.<sup>33</sup>

Like the mahallah, the kolkhozes have done much to perpetuate both Islamic tradition in Tajikistan and perhaps, less constructively, they have deepened the political fragmentation wrought by patron-client networks.

#### F. THE CIVIL WAR

The Tajik republic realized independence in December 1991 as a signatory of the CIS Security pact, ostensibly allowing Moscow to guarantee its security and play a major economic role. Yet, the economy of Tajikistan, which had for the most part been dependent on Soviet support, was much too weak to support such a quick transition to independence, the economy quickly became a major source of conflict. In some areas, there was over fifty percent unemployment and a widespread sense of relative deprivation. Furthermore, the weak sense of Tajik national identity meant that nationalism could not be counted upon as a viable alternative to communism for eliciting for the new republic, as was the case in the four other new Central Asian states.<sup>34</sup>

Another factor precipitating armed conflict was the relative ease with which both sides could arm themselves. The security forces,

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>34</sup> Rubin, 208.

consisting mostly of Slavs and answering to Moscow, provided a ready made source of arms to one side while the long Tajik-Afghan frontier provided arms and money for the other.<sup>35</sup> These factors led to an all out civil war that racked Tajikistan for five years at the cost of over 50,000 dead.

To the outside world, Tajikistan's civil war appeared to be a civilizational confrontation with the forces of Islam arrayed on one side against a secular, democratic government on the other. Actually, the war resulted more from competition among the regional patron-client networks with external political influences thrown into the mix, rather than between different and religious alliances.<sup>36</sup>

In 1990, with the advent of Perestroika came the development of several groups opposed to the local communist elites who ran the country before and following independence. The government, known as Khujand-Kulabi, was mostly representative of the Kulabi and Hisori clans with members drawn from clans in the Leninabad region.<sup>37</sup>

The opposition parties aligned themselves under several ideological banners: cultural nationalist (the Rastakhez or Rebirth Party); religious

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>36</sup> Sergei Gretsky, *Tajikistan: The Latest Gamble*. Retrieved 3 June 2000 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.cpss.org/focus>, 1998.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Underland and Nicholas Platt, *The Central Asian Republics: Fragments of Empire, Magnets of Wealth*. (New York: The Asia Society, 1994), 58.

(the Islamic Renaissance Party or IRP); democratic (the Democratic Party or DP); and regional or sub-ethnic autonomist (The Ruby of Badakhshan).<sup>38</sup> The opposition groups originated mostly from the Garmi and Badakhshoni clans.<sup>39</sup> These groups had all been traditionally under-represented in the ruling coalitions during Soviet and pre-Soviet rule.<sup>40</sup> The IRP, whose members mostly came from the Garmi clan, was the largest and strongest opposition group overall, fighting long after the others capitulated.<sup>41</sup>

In May 1992, after just a few days of violent demonstrations and fighting, a coalition of opposition groups forced the president to form a new coalition government. In September, the president was forced to resign at gunpoint and opposition leaders assumed complete control. The Leninabad Oblast in the north refused to recognize this new government and shut itself off from the rest of the country in protest. Also, in retaliation against the opposition coalition government, Kulabi clans formed an army called Popular Front of Tajikistan with the help of Uzbekistan. Other armed militias from the Hisor Valley clans likewise

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<sup>38</sup> Rubin, 213.

<sup>39</sup> Underland and Platt, 59.

<sup>40</sup> *Non-governmental Organizations*, Retrieved 16 November 2000 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/ops/war/tajikistan.htm>

<sup>41</sup> Underland and Platt, 58.

sprang up to fight the new government.<sup>42</sup> By December 1992, the Popular Front prevailed over the opposition forces and returned power to the pre-war communist government.

Although the coalition government agreed to step down, the fighting continued unabated. The re-established government then appealed to the CIS to assist in stemming the violence. The mostly Russian and Uzbek CIS “peacekeeping” force arrived, but blatantly sided with the regime, immediately losing whatever legitimacy it may have had as a true peacekeeping force. Backed by Russian and Uzbek forces, the pro-government forces pushed the opposition forces south into Afghanistan and north into the Tajik mountains. Tens of thousands of refugees fled into Afghanistan, and hundreds of thousands fled the country for Russia and other CIS republics. Pro-government Hisori and Kulabis massacred thousands of Garmis and Badakhshonis in summary executions.<sup>43</sup> Only three months after the new coalition took over, the CIS “peacekeepers” had restored the communists to power.

The violence however, continued as the various opposition groups, (but particularly the IRP and some members of the DP supported by fundamentalist Afghan forces), frequently executed raids and ambushes

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 61.

from hideouts across the border with Afghanistan. Although these raids and incursions did not threaten central government control outside the border areas, they caused casualties, blocked roads, and interfered with the movement of relief supplies and refugees.<sup>44</sup>

At the time of this writing, Russian and Uzbek armies and air forces still back Tajik government forces, and have recently been joined by Kazak and Kyrgyzk troops in efforts to stop “Islamic terrorists” operating throughout the region.

#### **G. FOREIGN INFLUENCES ON THE CIVIL WAR**

As mentioned earlier, external influences were also at work in the civil conflict. Iran and Afghanistan both, for a while at least, supported various IRP factions. The Afghanis share the same religion and language as the Tajiks; additionally, more than two million ethnic Tajiks live in Afghanistan. In 1998, they were joined by tens of thousands of refugees from the now six-year old civil war. The Tajik rebels became more united and radicalized vis à vis Islam thanks to their relations with their Afghan brothers.<sup>45</sup> Probably more important to the Tajiks than the military support of the local Afghan guerrilla leaders was the inspiration they drew from them in light of the Mujahedeen’s “victory of Islam” over

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<sup>44</sup> *Non-governmental Organizations*, Retrieved 16 November 2000 from the World Wide Web:  
<http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/ops/war/tajikistan.htm>

<sup>45</sup> J. Anderson, *The International Politics of Central Asia*, (New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 178.

Communism.<sup>46</sup> However, as it eventually had for the Afghans, violence became more an end in itself than a means for many Tajiks. Criminalization of the fighters increased as drug smuggling money bought guns and fed soldiers.<sup>47</sup>

As far as an Afghani agenda in Tajikistan, I could find only one reference. It is well known that certain Afghani generals dream of a greater Afghanistan--one that would, of course, include the Persian speaking Tajikistan.<sup>48</sup> However, it is unlikely that, given the internal strife in Afghanistan itself, Afghani rebels can continue to provide the political and military support needed to assist the IRP in its efforts to overthrow the regime in Tajikistan.

Iran has also been involved in the conflict on the side of the Islamist factions. Significantly, the Shiite Iranians, for the first time, have openly supported a Sunni Muslim cause by backing the Tajik insurgents. This support has raised concerns for Western powers and the CIS as it suggests the possibility of all fundamentalist groups uniting under one banner. Even so, what may be more important to some of the

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<sup>46</sup> Meshabi, 275.

<sup>47</sup> Anderson, 179.

<sup>48</sup> Vladimir Slipchenko, *Russia's Political and Military Problems in Central Asia*. Retrieved September 15, 1999 from the World Wide Web:  
<http://call.army.mil/call/fmso/fmsopubs/issues/slipfn12.htm>. (1995)

more doctrinaire Muslim rebels than arms or money is the model offered by the Iranian Revolution.<sup>49</sup>

Iranian support, although enthusiastic at first, has turned out to be relatively constrained. Iran's greatest enemy remains Iraq. Since the Allies chose to allow Saddam Hussein to remain in power after the Gulf War, he still poses a threat to Iran. To prepare for the eventuality of war with Iraq, Iran relies heavily on a favorable arms trade with Russia.<sup>50</sup> Knowing how fearful the CIS is about an Islamic takeover in Central Asia, Iran will do nothing to alienate Russia as a potential ally in a second Iran-Iraq war.<sup>51</sup>

Factions within Iran and Afghanistan appear to have done more to bolster true Islamic fervor than most of the internal forces in Tajikistan. Although their influences have been limited due to their own domestic constraints, one can surmise that they have had great demonstration effects, and have had a spiritual impact on Islamic rebels in Tajikistan, at the very least.

## H. CONCLUSION

Of all the newly independent states, it was thought that Tajikistan would be the most likely to "succumb" to an Islamic revival capable of

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<sup>49</sup> Anderson, 174.

<sup>50</sup> Meshabi, 185.

<sup>51</sup> Dianne Smith, *Central Asia: A New Great Game*, (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1996), 10.

replacing the status quo with a true Islamic state. Yet this has not happened, and as of this writing, there seems to be no popular movement in Tajikistan advocating the establishment of one. There appears to be little support for such a radical change in the ideology of the standing government not even from within the IRP, which is now a legal participating entity! In a recent interview with the New York Times, a Mr. Hizomov Mirzokhuzha, one of the IRP's two national level cabinet ministers summed up his feelings on the issue of an Islamic state in Tajikistan:

"I was the chief military commander of the opposition during the civil war, and at that time until now there has never been any discussion of creating an Islamic republic. When I was fighting, I was fighting for justice for the citizens, for the women and the children and for no other purpose. Do we believe in God? Of course, we believe in God. We are the same as our ancestors, but as for Islam. I probably know more about Marxism and Leninism and so no one could call me an Islamic fundamentalist."<sup>52</sup>

This view supports the idea that although Islamic traditions outlasted seventy-years of Soviet rule, the political face of Islam that can be seen elsewhere in the world was successfully suppressed to some extent. This, coupled with the very rational and traditional nature of Tajik Islamic practices leads one to conclude that a political revolt based on Islamic principles was never in the making in Tajikistan.

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<sup>52</sup> Patrick Tyler, (2000, October 29). Islamic Revival Wears Many Faces in a Secular Asian Land. New York Times, p. 6.

Even if the Islamic Revival Party of the opposition coalition could have held out militarily, would they have formed a government based solely on Shari'a? Probably not since they were still part of a coalition of several parties with widely divergent motives. Furthermore, neither a Tajik nor an Islamic identity has been sufficient to provide a cogent unifying force for any political rebellion to hang on to power once attained.<sup>53</sup> The ubiquitous adherence to clan regionalism has continued to undermine the successful prosecution of either a nationalist or Islamic claim to power.

The pragmatic flavor of Tajik Islam is important for understanding the overall lack of cohesive support for the creation of a true Islamic state in Tajikistan, a state the average Tajik does not want or even understand particularly since his view of Islam revolves more around traditions than politics.

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<sup>53</sup> Meshabi, 188.

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### **III. FERGHANA VALLEY**

#### **A. BACKGROUND**

High on the list of the world's "powder keg" regions is the Ferghana Valley in Central Asia. This, too, is a region that is widely characterized as a hotbed for Islamic fundamentalism. As of this writing major news agencies continue to report attacks and kidnappings by Islamic activists throughout the valley and its mountainous surrounds. Most of these assaults are attributed to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an umbrella organization adhering to an extremely doctrinaire form of Islam known as Wahabbism. The IMU's constituents vow to topple the standing post-Soviet national governments and replace them with Islamic states. The number of activists is rumored to be in the low thousands, but they are thinly spread, lightly armed, and poorly organized. Nevertheless, the leaders of the three nation-states that comprise the Ferghana consider the threat to be significant enough that they have formed a regional security alliance to prevent an Islamic takeover.

In addition to this continuous terrorist activity, there have been significant episodes of ethnic-political violence in the Ferghana since the break-up of the Soviet Union. Islam played a much more divergent role in each of the Ferghana's countries of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan than it now plays in the IMU's terror campaign.

Scholars and statesmen often view the Ferghana Valley as a microcosm of the entire Transcaucasus and Central Asia, insofar as it possesses all the historical and demographic sources of instability that plague the rest of the region. As such, exploring the different roles Islam has played in political violence there may be instructive for comprehending similar effects and relationships throughout Central Asia, and indeed throughout much of the rest of Eurasia.

The valley itself is only approximately three hundred kilometers long and varies between twenty and seventy kilometers in width. Even though the land represents only five percent of the total of Central Asia, it contains roughly twenty-four percent of the region's population. Like most large valleys in extremely high mountainous regions, the Ferghana Valley is a main source of food and water.<sup>1</sup> It also is home to twenty-two percent of the region's industries.<sup>2</sup>

The geography of the Ferghana Valley and its immediate surrounds has significant socio-political ramifications. First, forbiddingly high mountains cut off each of the three areas of the Ferghana Valley from the rest of their respective nation-states. Second, there are no natural barriers separating the three nations on the valley floor itself. These two critical

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<sup>1</sup> Ferghana Valley Working Group of the Center for Preventative Action, *Calming the Ferghana Valley: Development and Dialogue in the Heart of Central Asia*, (New York: Century Foundation Press, 1999), xv.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 139.

points of geography have created a region whose peoples have literally been separated from those responsible for governing them, whereas each of these peoples exists in juxtaposition with members of the other two national peoples. In other words, even though national boundaries subdivide the Ferghana Valley into three regions, it is vital to remember that to its eight million indigenous people, the Valley is historically, economically, and socially, a region unto itself. It was not until the new states each realized its own independence in the 1990s that those national borders solidified, ripping apart the Ferghana's social fabric.

#### **B. SOURCES OF REGIONAL INSTABILITY**

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been a resurgence of Islamic activism along several fronts throughout the former Central Asian Soviet republics. Although most elements of this Islamic revival serve civic purposes, some of these fronts espouse violence against the secular regimes. Popular sentiment states that most, if not all, of the violence in the Ferghana Valley is the handiwork of radical Islamists. However, on closer examination, much of the political violence can be seen to not have been motivated by Islamic fundamentalism. Rather, political entrepreneurs have used Islam to organize and mobilize the overwhelmingly Muslim populace to further their own varied political agendas.

The characterization of the post-Soviet era violence as primarily religious in nature appears, on the surface, to be rather convincing.

Indeed, the argument is not altogether incorrect; it is merely insufficient. To fully understand the causes of political violence in the region, one must explore a complex array of relationships involving clan, regional, sub-regional, ethnic, economic, and nationalist divisions as well as international relationships. There are even important allegiances owed to neighborhood associations called *mahalla*.<sup>3</sup> Many of these combine to reinforce divergences, further complicating an already confusing array of connections and conflicts.

Anara Tabyshalieva, a native Kyrgyz sums up the situation in post-Soviet Central Asia in her study of the Ferghana Valley for the United States Institute for Peace:

...over-population, a chronic decline in living standards, and ecological crises. These problems are further complicated by these states' ethnic and religious diversity... Central Asia's problems are indeed complicated and multi-faceted; so much so that standard approaches in the examination of such ethno-religious conflict typically ignore an underlying regional and clan-based competition over economic resources.<sup>4</sup>

Tabyshalieva sees "social fragmentation" as the greatest threat to regional security throughout Central Asia. She considers this fragmentation on several levels. First, there are ethnic tensions between

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<sup>56</sup> Anara Tabyshalieva, *The Challenge of Regional Cooperation in Central Asia: Preventing Ethnic Conflict in the Ferghana Valley*, (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 1999), 4.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

the Slavs (Russians and Ukrainians) and the indigenous peoples; conflicts along these lines have primarily occurred in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.<sup>5</sup> These tensions often reflect a struggle between the urban "haves" and the rural "have-nots". A second level of ethnic fragmentation exists between indigenous ethnic groups, for example the "Persian" Tajiks against the Turkic Uzbeks or Kazaks. The third level takes the form of regional cleavages within titular nationalities. Examples of this are the violent competition between the northern and southern regions of Kyrgyzstan, the competition among the three hordes in Kazakhstan, or between the various provinces in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.<sup>6</sup>

A 1999 study conducted by the Center for Preventative Action, an American think-tank active in the region, proposed the following rational sources for conflict within the Ferghana Valley: first, population pressure. According to the Center for Preventative Action study, the Valley's population density stood at 450 people per square kilometer in 1989. This relatively high figure, coupled with an historical annual population rate growth of 2.6% is creating great instability, especially since over half of the current population is under the age of sixteen.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

These youth will soon enter an already incredibly poor job market, and absolutely overwhelm it.<sup>7</sup>

A second source of tension is the severe economic decline that has marked the post-Soviet era. When Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan became independent from the Soviet Union, they lost about one-fifth of their respective gross domestic product. The attendant changes from a central economy toward separate market-oriented economies have brought price inflation and a sharp drop in wages. Repeated poor harvests due to droughts and storms have devastated regional agriculture. The government of Tajikistan, consumed by a long and bloody civil war, seriously neglected both industry and agriculture in its Ferghana Valley provinces, aggravating an economy that was already headed for disaster.

Linked to both the rapid rise in population and a devastated economy is the huge unemployment rate throughout the Valley. The 1999 unemployment rate in the Uzbek part of the Valley stood at thirty-five percent, with most of the unemployed under the age of twenty-five. Adding to the general disaffection of Uzbekistan's unemployed is the widely held perception that the ethnic Kyrgyz unemployment figures are distinctly lower.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ferghana Valley Working Group, 60.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 65.

Such severe economic decline has had two deleterious socio-political repercussions: one, it has made the Valley's people and administrations look like losers compared with their counterparts elsewhere in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Second, local economic woes exacerbate ethnic tensions within the Valley due to the perception that some groups may be better off than others.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, perceptions of relative deprivation by identity groups have been the most common cause of violence in the region to date.

The Center for Preventative Action study also lists the competition for land as a third major source of tension. The rising population rates coupled with national land schemes deemed ethnically unfair have led directly to violence across the region.<sup>10</sup>

Water is the fourth key issue. Water is a precious resource that has been terribly managed by regional administrations. As in the Middle East, water rights are a constant source of tension both between states and within states.<sup>11</sup> The main sources of water entering the Ferghana are two rivers, the Amu Darya, originating in the mountains of Tajikistan and the Syr Darya, whose source is in Kyrgyzstan. Decades of over-exploitation in support of grandiose irrigation and industrial schemes by the Soviets

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 65.

had, by the 1980s, all but decimated an already fragile hydro-ecosystem.<sup>12</sup> While scarcity is an obvious concern, the main source of tension is the administration of water allocation to downstream areas. In 1996, officials in the U.S. Embassy in Tajikistan reported that there was an undercurrent of suspicion that neighboring Kyrgyzstan was scheming to tap Tajik water to irrigate Kyrgyz farmland in the Ferghana Valley.<sup>13</sup>

Water is both a source of power and weakness. Some Tajiks speak of using water as an offensive weapon if war arose with Uzbekistan; poisoning the river, bursting dams to cause floods, or simply restricting the flow of water all been suggested.<sup>14</sup> As privatization schemes continue across the Valley, water administration, now centrally controlled in each region, will have to be reformed to prevent domestic feuds over water rights.<sup>15</sup> Several conflicts have already erupted over local water allocation as with other issues; the fault lines are usually ethnic.

The fifth and sixth sources of tension that the Center for Preventative Action study mentions are the widespread corruption of government officials and the ubiquity of organized crime throughout the region. Typical Soviet legacies, both grew directly out of consumer

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<sup>12</sup> Shirin Anker, *Central Asia: Conflict or stability and Development?*, (London: Minority Rights Group, 1997), 12.

<sup>13</sup> Ferghana Valley Working Group, 64.

<sup>14</sup> Akiner, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 13.

product scarcity, poor oversight, and inadequate accountability at all levels of administration. Their adverse effects on the region are profound. Corruption has greatly added to the already huge public mistrust of government officials. Furthermore, it places enormous obstacles in front of ongoing attempts at democratic reform. As for organized crime, although its activities generate large amounts of cash to a segment of the population, it is nonetheless destabilizing, particularly given the huge trade in illegal narcotics, which precludes fundamental economic reform in the region.<sup>16</sup>

The final source of tension the study cites is the dramatic vacuum in basic social services created by the withdrawal of the Soviets. Health and education services have declined significantly since 1991.<sup>17</sup>

Within the national boundaries that divide the Ferghana Valley, the manifestations of these sources of conflict can be further specified: In Uzbekistan, the regime's fear of the relatively small group of Islamic activists linked to a broader Islamic revival is compounded by a mistrust of its neighbor states. The Uzbek regime blames Afghanistan and Tajikistan for harboring these terrorists, an allegation which both emphatically deny. In southern Kyrgyzstan, tensions exist between ethnically similar Uzbek and Kyrgyz populations. The large Uzbek

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<sup>16</sup> Ferghana Valley Working Group, 69.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 76.

population there is believed by the local Kyrgyz to harbor irredentist hopes for autonomy. This is a theme heard throughout Central Asia, perpetuated by the Uzbek regime's domineering foreign policy.<sup>18</sup> In the remaining third of the valley, in what is northern Tajikistan, there is resentment of the ruling elites who are primarily from the southern Tajik province of Kulab.<sup>19</sup>

These state-specific sources of unrest are smaller versions of what concerns Tabyshalevia as well as Martha Brill Olcott. Olcott explains the potential for conflict in Central Asia as a whole:

The fact of ethnic and religious differentiation in Central Asia should not be understood as a portent of inevitable and ineluctable conflict. Uzbeks and Kyrgyz or Kazaks and Russians will not fight simply because they are Uzbek and Kyrgyz or Kazak and Russian. However, like many people who have been lied to, manipulated, cheated and abused long enough, any of these people could be provoked to seek quick and easy answers to the host of complex problems which beset them—in which case the rich human variety of Central Asia will provide a ready arsenal of ethnic and religious scapegoats.<sup>20</sup>

An analysis of the political developments over the last decade also sheds light on the reasons for social discontent in the Ferghana. The sudden enforcement of the long ignored national boundaries partitioning the Ferghana Valley following independence has caused a rise in tensions. For centuries, the Valley had been treated as a common economic and

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<sup>18</sup> Tabyshalieva, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Ferghana Valley Working Group, 13-14.

<sup>20</sup> Olcott, 18.

social unit, distinct from the rest of Central Asia. With independence, each sovereign state began to pursue different political and economic policies that disrupted the Ferghana's long-standing internal systems economic, educational, cultural, and even familial exchange. Additionally, regional power bases lost authority to the newly empowered central governments.<sup>21</sup> With independence, the artificial and largely unnoticed inter-republican borders that Stalin designed in the 1920's became very real barriers. Customs houses and troops now stand guard where, for hundreds of years, merchants and shepherds freely traveled. This dissection is in and of itself a major cause of friction.<sup>22</sup>

The Soviets, across their empire, had nationalized areas in an effort to create ethnic identities in their modern form. The largely artificial republican borders ignored the traditional means by which the inhabitants of the Ferghana Valley had historically identified themselves, according to their religious practices, place of settlement, and family or clan affiliation.<sup>23</sup> The creation of nations and their respective ethnic identities provided the Soviets with the ability to "divide and rule". Thanks to the degree to which populations were already intermingled in Central Asia, it was simple to redraw titular national boundaries that placed large numbers

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<sup>21</sup> Ferghana Valley Working Group, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 37-38.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

of ethnic groups within the borders of other republics. The Soviets then ensured that national elites were either ethnic Russian or loyal to Moscow.

There were two consequences to different ethnic populations living together in a single nation. First, by granting a certain amount of autonomy to the various ethnic groups situations developed that allowed Moscow to act as an arbiter of ethnic disputes. Second, no republic was able to mount any significant mass protest against Soviet authority. In the end, however, with the removal of imperial law, there has been a burgeoning of ethnic tension and conflict. This is not unique to Central Asia. We have seen a similar phenomenon in the Balkans and in the Transcaucasus.

All of these varied sources of instability served to open a door to violence. In addition to the ongoing terrorist campaign throughout the region, there have been several other significant episodes of political violence in the Ferghana. Two of the more major events were: The 1989 ethnic riots in Uzbekistan and the Osh-Uzgen riots of 1990. In both cases, overpopulation, scarcities of water and arable land, economic hardships, and social differentiation reanimated forgotten historical grievances.<sup>24</sup> There has also been a series of smaller scale violent incidents over the last decade. These range from near bloodless local

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<sup>24</sup> Tabyshalieva, 19.

takeovers of administrations by Islamic groups in Uzbekistan to pitched battles involving discontented militias in Tajikistan.

### C. UZBEK-MESKHETIAN TURK VIOLENCE OF 1989

The first significant political violence in the period just preceding and immediately following independence from the Soviet Union, involved rioting between Uzbeks and the resident Meskhetian Turk minority in Uzbekistan. The Soviets had deported the Meskhetian Turks from Georgia during World War Two as part of their "divide and rule" policy. The two groups are linguistically and religiously related and had co-existed peacefully in Uzbekistan for decades.<sup>25</sup>

The violence reportedly began when a Meskhetian man overturned the market stall of an Uzbek woman he accused of having inflated the price of strawberries. This relatively minor incident quickly ignited riots and pogroms against Meshketians in several cities, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of people, mostly Turks. The basis for the Uzbek action was the perceived economic disparity between the two ethnically and linguistically similar peoples. Despite having peacefully coexisted under communist rule for decades, pitched battles ensued for over two weeks. The Uzbeks' goal was to rid their country of the Turks in the belief that it

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<sup>25</sup> Tabyshalieva, 20.

would better their economic and social lot.<sup>26</sup> Most of the Turks, again "helped" by the Soviets, fled the region to escape death.

#### D. OSH-UZGEN RIOTS OF 1990

A larger scale conflict erupted in the Kyrgyz portion of the Ferghana in June of 1990. Land redistribution, perceived unfair housing policies, the absence of ethnic Uzbeks in the upper echelons of the local and regional political administrations, and a desire for greater Uzbek autonomy are cited as the primary causes of the violence.<sup>27</sup> The violence was sparked when a regional committee, formed to redistribute land and housing to economically deprived Kyrgyz, attempted to reallocate land belonging to an Uzbek- run collective farm in order to provide new Kyrgyz housing. The subsequent dispute led to a riot that was only put down by Soviet troops after the failure of the local police. The police themselves had greatly exacerbated the already volatile situation by firing blindly into the crowds.<sup>28</sup> The violence quickly spread, resulting in large-scale ethnic rioting in the Kyrgyz cities of Osh and Uzgen. An estimated three to five hundred people were killed, and over a thousand were wounded on both sides. Again, these ethnic groups had peacefully coexisted for centuries before this conflict. A week of what amounted to

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>27</sup> Ferghana Valley Working Group, 46-47.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 48.

intense ethnic cleansing nonetheless ensued, characterized by the mass raping of women and the mutilation of bodies.<sup>29</sup> Witnesses reported that signs saying “Uzbek Meat-Free of Charge” were displayed on bodies in the streets.<sup>30</sup> Sporadic ethnic violence continued well into August of that year.

During the conflict, ethnically-based political parties capitalized on national exclusiveness themes in information campaigns pitting Uzbek and Kyrgyz against each other. Party leaders intentionally recruited the young, often unemployed, to fight for their respective causes. Local factional leaders used Islam as both a mobilizing agent and as an intensifier to first ignite political violence and later fan its flames, leading to extremes in ethnic violence. Although both ethnic groups were comprised of Muslims, the leaders were still able to mobilize sympathy by exposing religious tensions by pitting “good” Muslims against “bad” Muslims. The widespread use of religious slogans such as “return the holy places to the righteous Muslims”, helped ratchet up the violence.<sup>31</sup>

Both this clash and the violent episode between the Uzbeks and members of the Meskhetian-Turk minority foreshadow dangerous consequences for the future of political conflict in the Ferghana Valley

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<sup>29</sup> Tabyshalieva, 20.

<sup>30</sup> Ferghana Valley Working Group, 47.

<sup>31</sup> Tabyshalieva, 10.

and across Central Asia, with local leaders able to link ethno-national identity platforms to perceived social or economic injustices. This admixture of motives is particularly intoxicating for the masses of young disaffected unemployed or underemployed Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, who were the primary perpetrators of the violence.

#### **E. OTHER VIOLENT EPISODES**

A discussion of several other violent episodes in the Ferghana valley should aid in rounding out the picture of the region's precarious security environment. In December 1991, a large group of mostly unemployed youths calling themselves Adolat took over the former communist party headquarters in Namangan, Uzbekistan, initially intending to use it as an Islamic center. Capitalizing on their quick success, they then widened their goals, eventually implementing a de facto Islamic self-rule over the city. They then issued demands for the institution of Shari'a, (Islamic law), over the whole of Uzbekistan. Initially, estimating the support for the group to be at 50,000, the Uzbek president Islam Karimov temporarily allowed the group to persist in power. However, he soon cracked down on them, arresting seventy-one of their leaders and forcing hundreds to flee the country.<sup>32</sup> The significance of this incident is that it has permanently put Karimov on guard. Even though Karimov was sworn in to office with his hand on the Koran, his

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<sup>32</sup> Ferghana Valley Working Group, 48-49.

regime has ruthlessly repressed any form of political Islam. The government authorities even discourage everyday Muslim traditions such as the wearing of veils and beards.

Since the 1997 peace treaty that ended the Tajik Civil War, there has been a series of conflicts in post-war northern Tajikistan that continues to pose security concerns in its sector of the Ferghana Valley. Several renegade militias from the northern part of Tajikistan have engaged in what amount to running battles. These Ferghana-based militias were largely excluded from the government which was formed predominantly by the leaders from the southern provinces after the war.

In 1997, violence erupted in Leninabad, Tajikistan. Protesters demanded the removal of several unpopular local administrators whom the government had appointed as well as more local (northern) influence in the central government. During the ensuing demonstrations, the security forces killed five people and arrested hundreds. This was followed by a period of anti-state violence perpetrated by several local northern militias.<sup>33</sup>

In 1998, the leader of one of these regional militias, an army colonel named Makhmud Khudoiberdiyev, an ethnic Uzbek, led a bloody uprising against the Tajik central government. With nine hundred soldiers, he attacked government forces in the northern city of Khujand.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 50.

Interestingly, this particular Tajik city was part of Uzbekistan until 1929. The uprising failed; the fighting left over two hundred killed and over five hundred wounded on both sides. Khudoiberdiyev then fled to Uzbekistan.

During 1997 and 1998, there were several other serious incidents of political violence in the Ferghana Valley. Beheadings and other murders of local administrators, car bombs, and raids throughout the region have created a situation of grave instability. These are usually blamed on Afghan or Saudi-backed Wahabbi terrorists. There is some speculation that many of these acts were carried out to aid in the illegal trafficking of narcotics which is a mainstay of many local economies.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, as recently as February of 1999, six car bombs exploded in the Uzbek capitol, Tashkent. The government arrested members of a Ferghana based Islamic militant group. Government officials, however, doubting the group's capacity to carry out such a sophisticated plan, openly speculated that this was the work of foreign hands.<sup>35</sup> Several local conflicts continue to erupt over land and water rights.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 54.

#### F. ISLAMIC TERRORISM IN THE FERGHANA

Ethnic politics notwithstanding, there *are* Islamic activists who have executed violent acts in order to establish Shari'a as the law of the republics. Even these groups however, are not devoid of political ambitions. Their attacks against the various regimes are expressive in that they heavily use Islamic rhetoric and symbolism, yet their agendas are decidedly instrumental.

The distinction between religious actors and political terrorists is often blurred in political Islam. It can be intuitively stated however, that Islamic terrorism is clearly non-millennial in character, a supposition that makes differentiating it from political terror all the more difficult. As David Rappaport, an expert on terrorism, states: "Although everyone has noticed the phenomenon, no one has yet distinguished the characteristics of holy terror from those of political or secular terror".<sup>36</sup> Since 1995, the most radical of these religious terrorist groups operating in the Ferghana Valley exist under the doctrinal umbrella of Wahabbism, an ultra-conservative Islamic movement originating in Saudi Arabia. The fundamental overarching goal of Wahabbi movements throughout the region is the removal of the current secular regimes, followed by the emplacement of Islamic governments. Despite the ubiquitous Islamic

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<sup>36</sup> David Rappaport, "Sacred Terror", in *Origins of Terrorism*. Ed. Walter Reich, (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998), 104.

revival seen throughout Eurasia, it appears that the Wahabbi terrorists are estranged from the great majority of their own Muslim constituency by the latter's more rational and less rigid approach to the role religion plays in their everyday lives.

Wahabbism, a strict puritanical Islamic sect that dominates Saudi life, came to Central Asia relatively late, in 1912.<sup>37</sup> The sect has enjoyed a revival in recent years thanks, in large part to huge monetary donations from supporters of Wahabbism in Saudi Arabia.

One of the more recent and infamous Saudi envoys of Wahabbism is the "arch-terrorist" Usama Bin Laden, who went to Afghanistan to not only fight the Soviets but to re-instill Wahabbism in Central Asia.<sup>38</sup> Wahabbi terrorist groups are widely suspected of perpetrating many of the attacks in the Ferghana Valley. These have ranged from the bombing of state buildings, car bombs, kidnapping of foreign nationals, assassinations of minor government officials and security forces. The terrorist's strength is unknown but they probably number in the thousands. They

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<sup>37</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?* (London: Oxford University press, 1994), 44.

<sup>38</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 84.

reportedly retreat to occupy safe havens in Tajikistan and Afghanistan after their attacks.<sup>39</sup>

Most of the Wahabbi groups appear to be relatively new: scarcely any are mentioned in sources before 1995. The great majority of them are based in Uzbekistan, but there is some activity in Tajikistan, southern Kyrgyzstan, and southern Kazakhstan. The four groups that are mentioned most frequently are the Hezb-e Tahrir (variously translated as Liberation or Correction Party); the Akromiya (named after the founder, Akrom Yuldashev), also known as the Iimonchilar (Believers) or Khalifatchilar (Caliphate Supporters); and the most prolific, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.<sup>40</sup> It would appear that these terrorists groups are finding fertile ground in which to sow the seeds of violent dissent given the myriad divisions among the Ferghana's inhabitants as described earlier. On the other hand, the rational, morality-based Sufi brand of Islam traditionally practiced in Central Asia may inhibit a truly doctrinaire terrorist movement with seemingly less than perfectly rational intentions from gaining ground.

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<sup>39</sup> U.S State Department, *Global Terrorism: Background Information on Terrorist Groups*, Retrieved 30 May, 2000, from the World Wide Web,  
<http://www.state.gov/www/global/terrorism/1999report/appb.html>

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

Although each of these Wahabbist organizations face inordinate difficulties in mobilizing the population given so many different political and cross-cutting allegiances, the secular ruling regimes may be inadvertently assisting the terrorists through their over-reactions. The current Uzbek regime, for instance, is cracking down on everyday Muslim customs and traditions by doing things such as banning the call to prayer via loudspeakers and the wearing of the veil by devout Muslim women. This plan of attack against seemingly non-politically motivated popular activities and traditions could turn the majority of the Muslims against the regime and encourage them into the Wahabbi camp. This would spell disaster for the regimes and create for Central Asia and its neighbors difficulties of "Koranic" proportions.

#### **G. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, one can surmise that although the political violence in the Ferghana Valley has a demonstrably Islamic flavor, particularly when analyzing the Wahabbi terrorist campaign, this simplistic characterization is at best insufficient, at worst dangerous. For example, the Uzbek regime's answer to stabilizing the Ferghana valley is to crack down on anything Islamic, which then precludes it from addressing and redressing the real cause of tensions in the region. Worse, this is bound to backfire on the regime since it encourages disaffected non-political

Muslims to move closer to radical Islamism in the face of the Ferghana Valley's serious societal decline.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 10.

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## IV. ARMENIA AND AZERBAIJAN

### A. BACKGROUND

The 1992-1994 conflict between Christian Armenians and Moslem Azerbaijanis that left over twenty-five thousand people dead and over a million homeless, requires a different approach for understanding the roles Islam and its frequent bedfellow, nationalism, play in generating ethnic violence. The conflict here has manifested itself in a bloody struggle over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, a mainly Armenian oblast squarely situated in Moslem Azerbaijan that holds historical and cultural significance for both sides.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Chechnya and Tajikistan, both sides resorted to extensive ethnic violence resulting in horrific atrocities. This “holy war” scenario appears to fit Samuel Huntington’s epic clash of Christianity versus Islam to a tee.

Huntington lists the intensification of this particular conflict early in his book as an example supporting his civilizational paradigm.<sup>2</sup> In a chapter entitled “The Dynamics of Fault Line Wars”, he delineates between three levels of players in a conflict. At the ground level are the fault line participants. In this situation, these would be the Armenian secessionists in the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave and their opposition, the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Croissant, *The Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict: causes and Implications*, (Westport CT: Praeger Press 1998), xii.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations: Remaking of World Order*, (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 38.

Azeri government and people. Huntington's second level is slightly removed from the conflict, which in this case would be the Armenian government. External interested players comprise the tertiary level, here to include Russia, Turkey, and Iran.<sup>3</sup> Involvement at the tertiary level, especially by Iran, explains Huntington's paradigm. However, interests at the primary level should be the focus of interventionary efforts. The danger in Huntington's paradigm is that the first level players' agendas may be perceived to be aligned with or even to have been supplanted by the interests of the secondary or tertiary levels. This misperception could prove troublesome if it is used in planning preventative engagement and post-conflict operations, because the assumptions made may have no real bearing on the situation in the area of operation.

In fact, after a brief review of the roles and actions undertaken by external or tertiary players in this case, one sees that tertiary players did not act to support either side in order to further a Christian or Islamic civilizational crusade. Instead, Iran and Turkey acted purely to protect their own interests in two areas: First, each has a strong stake in the Caspian oil markets and second, they are concerned with the security of their own frontiers and regime stability within their own territories. In the case of Russia, we can add a strong desire to keep the region within its sphere of influence. Russia has two key reasons for this: First, it

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 272-273.

wants complete control over existing oil and its proposed transit. Second, it is paranoid about Islamic fundamentalism and as such desires a strong leadership role in the regional security framework. Moscow sees Azerbaijan as a reliable bulwark against perceived Islamic activism generated by Iran.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, it fears contagion of ethnic strife leading to separatist clashes throughout its other ethnically diverse republics. Throughout the conflict, Moscow's support of one side or another fluctuated with bewildering frequency.<sup>5</sup> Initially, Moscow supported the Azeris but later, in what some scholars describe as indicative of the primal Russian fear of the northward spread of Islamic fundamentalism, switched sides. Turkey and Iran did assist Azerbaijan because of cultural and religious affinities. However, the significant large Turkish and Iranian cross-border operations Huntington cites were mainly conducted to contain the war within the borders of Azerbaijan.

A second and perhaps more applicable observation Huntington makes is that as a “fault-line” conflict progresses, the sides tend to rely more and more on their “civilizational” identity to rally their forces. This is especially true for the losing side. The most popular form of this identification throughout the region has been religion and the best

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<sup>4</sup> Suzanne Goldberg, *The Pride of Small Nations: The Caucasus and Post-Soviet Disorder*, (London: Zed Books Ltd. ,1994), 59.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 63.

examples of this process to date have involved Islam. Huntington states that Islam readily lends itself to this phenomenon:

"Fault line wars are by definition local wars between local groups with wider connections and hence promote civilizational identities among their participants. The strengthening of civilizational identities has occurred among fault line war participants but was particularly prevalent among Muslims. A fault line war may have its origins in family, clan, or tribal conflicts, but because identities in the Muslim world tend to be U-shaped, as the struggle progresses the Muslim participants quickly seek to broaden their identity and appeal to all of Islam..."<sup>6</sup>

This concept is clearly consistent with other theories of mobilization as was seen earlier in the case of the Tajik civil war. In large measure, I agree with Huntington's end state, in as much "as multiple identities fade and the identity most meaningful in relation to the conflict comes to dominate, that identity almost always is defined by religion."<sup>7</sup> However, I suspect that beyond the basic need to broaden the base of support locally, there is the ever present need to support one's forces logistically via appealing to secondary and tertiary players. Furthermore, a cultural alliance with what Huntington calls "core civilizational states" like Iran has permitted the trendy application of information operations or pyswar by the more flexible diaspora communities in those and other countries.

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<sup>6</sup> Huntington, 268.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 267.

alter the motives and interests of the primary players. It may only reflect the fundamental needs of a struggling faction, namely a broad base of support for war and the physical capability to wage that war. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh was very much a battle of identities. Although those identities could easily be delineated along religious lines, the struggle however, was not undertaken for religion; it was fought over territory or, perhaps more accurately, what that territory symbolized to each of the warring factions. In the next section, I will explore just how important this “territory” was to the average Armenian and Azeri. Since in this conflict, the link between the land held and national identity shaped the motivations of the factions and was the real cause of the war. This resulted in perhaps a less grand crusade than a civilizational struggle between East and West, but was instead a struggle for two peoples to cling to what they know as their own national identity, not reaching out to a wider civilizational embrace.

## **B. NATIONAL IDENTITY**

My study of this conflict shows that for the Azeris, Islam was indeed an essential popular mobilizer. For the Armenians, however, their religion was subsumed by their nationalism. Although, as throughout the Transcaucasus and Central Asia, the two areas are culturally and ethnically very diverse, the religious and ethnic divides among these two peoples, especially on the Armenian side, were singular enough to distinctly divide them into warring peoples. The key motivator for both

sides was territorial in nature; specifically they fought for sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh.

## 1. Armenia

For a former Soviet republic, Armenia is relatively homogeneous ethnically. As such, it has been free from internal ethnic strife and is the only newly independent state to have maintained its post-Soviet era opposition government.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Armenians can more readily identify themselves as members of a nation than can people in the former republics. As Ronald G. Suny explains: The Armenians have been able to distinguish a national identity since the fourth century A.D. by their adherence to an exclusive form of Monophysite Christianity. In the fifth century A.D., Saint Mestrop devised an alphabet for the Armenian language.<sup>9</sup> These two characteristics formed the fundamental basis for an Armenian uniqueness. An isolating mountainous geography reinforced this commonality over the centuries. Additionally, Armenia's strategically important position, providing the surrounding empires an intercontinental bridge, imposed centuries of external pressures.

For most of its history, outsiders have ruled Armenia. The list includes the Romans, Sassanids, Byzantines, Arabs, and Mongols.

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<sup>8</sup> Ronald Suny, *Provisional Stabilities*, International Security, Vol.24, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 153.

<sup>9</sup> Glenn E. Curtis, ed. *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Country Studies*, (Washington DC: HQDA, 1995), 10.

However, the most significant ruling empires were the Ottomans and the Russians. Their, identity-shaping influences ranged from an intensive russification effort and persecution by Imperial Russia to genocidal campaigns by the Ottomans in the late 1890s. The Ottoman sultan conducted a massive anti-Armenian pogrom in 1895 when Turkish troops slaughtered 300,000 Armenians in Anatolia. The sultan was responding to Armenian tendencies towards Europeanization which reinforced his view that the Armenians were represented as a subversive element.<sup>10</sup> Armenians felt surrounded by their Moslem neighbors and a rising economic elite felt the “backward” Ottomans would not carry Armenia forward. They reached out to the West during the Congress of Berlin in 1878 asking for, but not receiving European protection.

Russia and Britain did begin to take an interest in the “Armenian Question” and act on their behalf on several occasions. During World War One, as the Allies advanced on Turkey, the Ottoman leadership again ordered pogroms against the Armenians. Historians estimate the death toll for this round to be between 600,000 and two million people.<sup>11</sup>

This continual oppression by one empire after another further reinforced an isolated, mistrustful and warlike Armenian national

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 13.

character.<sup>12</sup> While Armenia itself suffered from continual foreign rule, Nagorno-Karabakh enjoyed relative autonomy given its geographic stronghold. For Armenians, Nagorno-Karabakh thus represented a bastion in which Armenian culture thrived.<sup>13</sup> Despite these relatively strong identity-creating factors, the Karabakh conflict itself had a significant effect on the national Armenian consciousness.

The aforementioned factors added up to a more isolated nationalist identity reinforced by victory in the conflict and opposition from the international community. In practice, this exclusivist nationalism led to a self-reliant foreign policy uncompromising in negotiating the Karabakh question during the post-war years.<sup>14</sup> Officially, the principal combatants in the conflict were “Karabakh Armenians”, but the significance of sovereignty over Karabakh was not lost on all Armenians. The isolative and unique nature of Armenian national identity gives some insight into why Nagorno-Karabakh has proven to be such a significant symbol, whose sovereignty is worthy of full-scale conflict.

Additionally, the struggle for Nagorno-Karabakh is related to Armenian nationalist bids for independence from the Soviet Union in 1988. The increasing Armenian concern over the status of the

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<sup>12</sup> Croissant, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>14</sup> Suny, 141.

Azeri-ruled, but largely autonomous oblast, combined with two other causal factors to set off a strong Armenian nationalist movement. The first of these was an increasing mistrust of and anger toward a pervasively corrupt and arrogant Armenian communist elite. Second, were growing fears of an ecological disaster due to heavy urbanization and industrialization.<sup>15</sup> Armenians feared that the 200,000 ethnic Armenians who inhabited the oblast would suffer the same cultural and demographic fate as Armenians in a second similar region in Azerbaijan called Nakhichevan. During the seventy years of Soviet rule, Nakhichevan's Armenian population declined by over four-fifths. Concurrently Armenians there were suppressed culturally and linguistically. The issue of Nagorno-Karabakh became the main rallying cry for Armenian nationalism.

Beyond regional or international politics, however, the affinity Armenians hold for the region lies in its history of isolation from empirical pressures. Throughout Armenia's long history of oppression and persecution, Nagorno-Karabakh has remained relatively free. It is a bastion of Armenian culture, untouched by the ruling empires.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 18.

## 2. Azerbaijan

Azeri perceptions of self-identity are much harder to trace than are those of the Armenians.<sup>16</sup> R. Gregor Suny suggests that a lack of a distinct national identity was a principle contributing cause for the defeat of the Azeris in the Karabakh war. He claims this shortcoming manifested itself in the inability of successive governments to recruit young Azeri men willing to fight the war.<sup>17</sup>

Until recently, the Azeris had no common language or religion from which to form an identity. The same external forces that shaped the uniqueness of Armenian culture tended to pull Azeri identity in two directions. Unlike the Armenians who shrank from aligning their culture with their imperial rulers, the Azeris reached out to theirs, in this case the Sunni Turks and the Shia Iranians.<sup>18</sup> Eventually, religious affinities drew Azeris closer to Iran while ethno-linguistic closeness bound them to Turkey.<sup>19</sup> However, as Michael Croissant points out: "...the Azerbaijani people have been prone to secularism throughout their history, thus limiting, in some circles the desirability of close ties with the Islamic

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>17</sup> Suny, 159.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald G. Suny, *Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 33.

<sup>19</sup> Croissant, 7.

Republic of Iran".<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, in contrast to what occurred in the Central Asian soviets, the seventy-odd years of Soviet repression of Islam were highly successful in Azerbaijan. In addition to encouraging secularization amongst the urban Azeri elites during the oil-driven industrialization of the late pre-Soviet era, a Soviet campaign to repress Islamic culture appears also to have succeeded. Surveys conducted in the early 1980s show that most Moslems did not really understand the meaning of Shari'a law and many had little knowledge of Islamic history.<sup>21</sup>

The cultural and religious affinities the Azeris developed with their former rulers tended to retard the development of a distinct Azeri national identity. I would posit that because of the lack of a robust sense of national identity Islam was needed more to rally Azeris than Christianity was needed in Armenia. Samuel Huntington observed that, as in the Tajik civil war, the Azerbaijani government "played the Islamic Card" to broaden its base of support for the war against the Armenians. In any event, a fervent sense of nationalism, or the appearance of a national identity, was also a sufficient mobilizer as well as the *causus belli*.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>21</sup> Audrey Altstadt, "Azerbaijan's Struggle Towards Democracy", in *Conflict, Cleavage, and Change in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrot, eds., (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 145.

The enemy for the Muslim *Azeris* was clearly Christian *Armenia* and the reason to fight was the preservation of sovereign Azeri territory. Azeris were not fighting the infidel Armenians to secure religious freedom or to establish a Moslem state. They were fighting to maintain the political arrangements over the governance of Nagorno-Karabakh. Because they lacked a strong sense of historical continuity, territory for the Azeris became the central national identifier. In their view, Nagorno-Karabakh was the heartland of Turkic presence and the birthplace of Azeri nationalism. The Azeris still view the region as the heartland of Turkic presence and the birthplace of Azeri nationalism.<sup>22</sup>

In a sense, then the true interests of the two enemies were fiercely nationalistic and both tied to territorial sovereignty. Islamism, in the Azeri case, simply defined the amplifying principal difference between the warring factions.

### C. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As with Central Asia, Mother Russia sowed the seeds for potential conflict in the region by a cruel colonization, first undertaken by imperial Russia and later by Soviet russification efforts. Czarist Russian policies in the nineteenth century produced a class distinction between Armenians and Azeris throughout the region. Armenians benefited disproportionately

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<sup>22</sup> Croissant, 139.

from economic advances.<sup>23</sup> The potential for ethnic unrest greatly increased when Caspian oil was discovered in the late 1800s. This led to an influx of ethnic Russians, Armenians, and others who moved to the capital city of Baku in order to reap the oil wealth.

Oil had two far-reaching effects on the domestic politics and cultural climate of Azerbaijan. First, oil's inherent economic and political buoyancy led to a rapid rise in an independently-thinking Azeri elite in Baku in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Concurrent with widening socio-economic divergences were pan-Turkic efforts made by a declining Ottoman Empire intent on uniting Turkic peoples throughout Eurasia. These campaigns, undertaken by the Turks in 1905 and again in 1918, fueled the already fast-growing lower-class Azeri hatred of local Armenians who Azeris regarded as being economically better off. Simultaneously, Armenians began to associate the Azeri Turks with the perpetrators of the past Turkish pogroms and genocidal massacres of Armenians. Finally, the Czarist policy of "divide-and-rule" exacerbated the already tense situation.<sup>24</sup> Widespread violence finally erupted in 1905 with murderous riots in Baku setting a bloody precedent for future and frequent conflict between two sides.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>24</sup> Croissant, 8.

One of the results of the 1905 riots was the addition of a territorial component to the regional enmity. Competing nationalist movements developed side by side in the largely Armenian oblasts of Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhichevan, which were attached by the Czar to Azerbaijan for economic and strategic reasons. Since the early modern era Nagorno-Karabakh had been ruled by Armenian princes. While Nagorno-Karabakh had a decidedly Armenian majority, (with a population ratio of about three-to one), the history supporting both Armenian and Azeri nationalistic claims is decidedly unclear! Suffice it to say that the oblast is highly contested among the scholars and historians of both countries.

Immense ethnic violence again hit the region during World War One with the alliance of the Azeris with the Turks against the Armenians who, in light of their genocidal treatment at the hands of the Turks, naturally sided with the Allies. A successful Armenian insurgency fought the Azeris and the Turks during the Ottoman occupation of the region following the War until the British arrived in late 1918. The British, hoping to curry favor with oil rich Baku, also attached Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan. The insurgency kept fighting. Armenia and Turkey continued open conflict over disputed territories into 1920 when Armenia capitulated. When the region was sovietized in 1923, the disputed

region's status quo was confirmed and continued by Stalin in the "divide and rule" vein.<sup>25</sup>

The Communists harshly subdued nationalistic violence until 1988, when the Soviet Empire's strong central authority started to wither. However, they never fully stamped out the nationalistic and irredentist desires of both Armenia and Azerbaijan over claims to Nagorno-Karabakh.

In the early 1960s activists in Armenia and in Nagorno-Karabakh began to agitate for the incorporation of the region into Armenia without success. It was not until the late 1980s that Gorbachev's policy of openness allowed a re-emergence of nationalist groups in the region. The rallies for the re-unification of Nagorno-Karabakh led to political violence in late 1987 and early 1988. Demonstrations by Karabakh Armenians led to violent reactions from disaffected Azeris in the industrial town of Sumgait who went on a killing spree, invading hospitals and dragging Armenians off buses. Fears about ethnic cleansing in each country spawned a refugee crisis with people fleeing to their own "homeland", where they often returned to an inhospitable socio-economic environment. Over time, the refugees became a radicalizing force fueling inter-communal clashes through 1990.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 28.

Contributing to the spread in the violence was Moscow's perceived inability or willingness to handle the crisis. The Kremlin, of course, was reluctant to bless nationalistic claims lest it open a Pandora's box of similar claims for independence amongst its hundreds of ethnic groups. At the same time, it appeared too timid to contain the violence. Gorbachev promised concessions to both sides, but no clear policy from Moscow was apparent. Eventually, Moscow placed Karabakh under direct rule for roughly a year. This period saw much political maneuvering along with nationally-motivated riots and strikes which left both sides fervently opposed to each other and to Moscow. Moscow's intransigence ended with the so-called "Black" January of 1991 when Soviet troops crushed nationalistic violence by occupying Baku and imposing martial law on the soviet. Moscow reinstalled a pro-communist government and then joined forces with it to destroy the Armenian movement to re-acquire Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>27</sup>

Soviet military units, originally sent to separate warring factions, (as we observed in Tajikistan) changed roles and combined with Azeri units to wage a brutal campaign in and around the oblast to rid the region of Armenian malcontents. These units destroyed Armenian militias and forcibly deported ethnic Armenians, replacing them with Azeri refugees.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 38.

These same combined forces later attacked three villages in Armenia proper to eradicate guerrilla operations.<sup>28</sup>

These operations galvanized both Armenia and Armenian nationalists in Nagorno-Karabakh for both an open war with Azerbaijan and strengthened Armenia's recent moves towards independence from the Soviet Union. Following the 1991 coup in Moscow, both Azerbaijan and Armenia declared independence, Soviet troops pulled out of the region, and a major escalation of local violence ensued.<sup>29</sup>

Essentially, the final break-up of the Soviet Union lifted any residual restraints on violent nationalistic actions. Full-scale war between both newly sovereign nations erupted in early 1992 and continued until the cease-fire in 1994.

The Supreme Soviet of the former oblast proclaimed independence in January of 1992, sparking a large Azerbaijani offensive. The Azerbaijanis did not fare well and one of the casualties was their president, forced by an irate population to resign over his national army's defeat by ethnic Armenian militiamen.<sup>30</sup> Throughout 1992, the Armenians held most of the disputed oblast while fierce fighting continued despite several Iranian brokered cease-fires. Turkey threatened involvement on

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 78.

the Azerbaijani side when Armenian forces attacked the other contentious region, Nakhichevan, which is contiguous to the northern Turkish border. At this point, Russia after remaining well away from the conflict for many months, stepped in with a stern warning to the Turks to stay out of the war.<sup>31</sup>

The fortunes of war shifted back and forth as both sides fought bloody battles in and around Nagorno-Karabakh with a decidedly favorable swing back to the Azeris in the fall and winter of 1992. This shift coincided with a change in government in Baku and a subsequent shift to a foreign policy focusing on Turkey as opposed to Russia and the CIS. This change occurred for three reasons. First, the new Azeri leadership viewed the secular, democratic, market-oriented Turkish system as an appropriate model to which to aspire. Second, as mentioned before, Azeri culture, more closely resembled Turkic rather than Slavic culture. Finally, the Azeris correctly suspected and accused Moscow of openly siding with Armenia in the struggle, a shift from the early days of the war.<sup>32</sup>

Both the Russians and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) began mediation efforts. The CSCE was unsuccessful,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 84.

but the Russians managed to negotiate a five-month cease-fire that neither side honored.

The beginning of 1993 saw an Armenian reversal of the recent Azeri victories, with Armenian forces holding the northern half of Nagorno-Karabakh by March of that year. Later that spring, the Armenian successes led them to carry the fighting outside of the disputed region and into Azerbaijan proper. The war came dangerously close to both Turkey's and Iran's northern frontiers threatening to widen the conflict. Indeed, Armenia's Seventh Army, still ostensibly controlled by Moscow and partially staffed by Russian officers, was poised to clash with Turkey's Third Army.<sup>33</sup> The United Nations, fearing a broader regional conflict, finally passed Resolution 822 to force a cease-fire.

Regardless, the fighting continued not only between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces but also among the Azeris themselves as a power struggle ensued between the president and opposition groups. A coup in June of 1993 installed a new Azeri government that was more loyal to Moscow, leading some to suspect heavy Russian involvement.<sup>34</sup> The Karabakh Armenians took full military advantage of the Azeri political disarray and continued to press deeper into Azeri territory, prompting a second round of diplomatic pressure from Turkey and Iran. This led to a

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 90.

second United Nations resolution, known as Resolution 853. This act again called for an immediate cessation of hostilities, but additionally affirmed sovereign boundaries and recognized the local Armenians as a legitimate entity. This occurred as Armenian gains forced tens of thousands of Azeri refugees toward the Iranian border. Iran, already fearful of malcontents in its own sizeable Azeri population sent armed units three to four kilometers inside Azerbaijan to set up a buffer zone to protect both the refugees and prevent their entry into Iran. Similarly, the Turks increased their military presence along their Armenian border. Again, in October of 1993, fearing a wider conflict, the United Nations passed a third act, Resolution 874 condemning the violence and calling for an immediate cease-fire. As Armenian forces pushed the Azeris further towards Iran, the Iranian president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani mobilized two divisions along the border with Azerbaijan. The United Nations enacted a fourth plea for calm, Resolution 884, in November 1993.<sup>35</sup>

By the end of 1993, the Karabakh Armenians had created two land bridges to Armenia, secured a twenty kilometer-wide buffer zone around Nagorno-Karabakh, and captured 20% of Azerbaijan's territory. Throughout January and February of 1994, the Azeris, having launched a desperate offensive, regained some of their lost territory with the help of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 95.

thousands of foreign mercenaries from Afghanistan and advisors from Turkey. With this escalation, both parties finally agreed upon a Russian-sponsored plan to end the fighting in May of 1994. Soon after, the long and difficult negotiations for a peaceful and permanent settlement of the issues surrounding the sovereignty of Nagorno-Karabakh began in earnest.<sup>36</sup> As of this writing, a mutual agreement has still not been reached and sporadic fighting, mostly along the border, occurred as recently as April 1997.<sup>37</sup>

In the latest OSCE-led negotiations, Azerbaijan has sought to maintain the pre-conflict status quo of Nagorno-Karabakh offering autonomy and security guarantees to the Armenians, but only once ethnic Armenian forces relinquish control of any and all territory they still hold in both Nagorno-Karabakh and in Azerbaijan proper. The Azerbaijanis explicitly rule out independence and still refuse to recognize the Karabakh Armenians as an equal negotiating partner.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, the complexities of “pipeline politics” continue to inspire external players to meddle in the negotiating process. Consequently, Turkey, Russia, the United States, Iran, and others continue to complicate resolution of most issues relating to the future of Nagorno-Karabakh.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 132.

#### **D. CONCLUSIONS**

International pipeline politics and the security concerns of bordering states notwithstanding, the fundamental Armenian-Azerbaijani struggle remains the same: sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh. To be fully successful in grasping the true fault line in this conflict, one must understand the profound meaning that this sovereignty holds for both sides. For the Azeris, the territory itself somehow replaces a sense of national identity stifled by its former rulers. For the Armenians the territory symbolizes their fragile uniqueness in a region surrounded by peoples very unlike themselves.

Although the conflict was fraught with meddling by tertiary players, it was not a civilizational clash by any stretch. The two sides fought to maintain what both believed to be the status quo in reference to their respective national identities. Apart from the logistical and tactical necessity of acquiring the external support which is necessary for emerging nations to prosecute a war, it was apparent that they never desired to attach a wider civilizational meaning to their struggle.

## V. CONCLUSION

Since the end of the relatively simple bi-polar world and its subsequent replacement by a fragmented and convoluted "new world order", it seems comforting, at least to some, to be able to still classify conflicts along familiar bi-polar lines. Professor Samuel Huntington's "East versus West" civilizational paradigm does exactly this. Huntington sees a world in which the forces of Islam are defiantly and dangerously arrayed against the Western secular world, with the green menace of Radical Islamic Fundamentalism conveniently replacing the "Red Menace" of communism. Although Islamic forces are often named as "usual suspects" in many of the past decade's conflicts, we have seen that in three with a strong Islamic flavor, important distinctions must be made among them. It is clear that a blanket explanatory hypothesis, such as the one proposed by the civilizational paradigm, is insufficient for determining policy and action in the face of these sorts of conflict.

Tajikistan's civil war, although heralded by some as a dangerous harbinger of a much feared regional Islamic takeover, was not that at all. In fact, the war resulted from competition between regional clans, not radical Islamic activism. The common Tajik attitude towards Islam, not as a radical, all-encompassing obsession, but rather as a pragmatic system of values and traditions, steered the opposition forces away from a desire

to establish an Islamic state and led them along a more rational path, one in which church and state would still be separated.

Analysis of the violent episodes in Central Asia's Ferghana Valley that pitted Muslim against Muslim clearly demonstrates that, although Islamic factors were manipulated by political entrepreneurs to further divide and mobilize ethnic groups, the conflict was really over scarce resources and perceptions of injustices drawn along ethnic and regional lines. Islamic factors in the episodic violence in that region have been tangential, not causal.

Not even the bloody ethnic conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, a war which pitted Muslim against Christian, can be conceived as a clash of East versus West, unless one analyzes it at levels far removed from the actual fighting, and considers third party participants like Russia, Iran, and Turkey jockeying for increased influence in the area. At ground level, in contrast, the conflict was purely a struggle to maintain national identity, with both sides committed to an absolute sovereignty over disputed territory.

For soldiers, diplomats, and members of non-governmental organizations, who will assuredly perform preventative, interventionary or post-conflict engagement roles in these or other similar regions, it is vital to recognize the true sources of conflict and understand the power networks that really matter at the local level. All too often, pre-

deployment briefings and published area studies lack sufficient detail at this vitally important level. These broad-stroke compilations only offer historical and situational assessments in national or, worse, international terms, and at what Professor Huntington refers to as the secondary and tertiary levels. Hence, they omit important facts about the primary or local level, where the actual fighting occurs. It is at this basic level where both military and civilian operators will most often execute missions to support regional security and stability.

Thus, there are certain additional imperatives for understanding that operators must pay attention to in order to successfully carry out their missions.

First, operators must possess a basic knowledge of the historical grievances that moved identity groups into a position to either self-mobilize or be mobilized by their leaders, or others, to fight.

Second, they should understand to whom or to what the various groups owe allegiance politically, militarily, economically and, equally importantly, spiritually. Very often the true power networks are not the formal systems set up by governments or opposition groups, they are informal patron-client networks based on regional clans, local shadow organizations, economic cooperatives, and even extended families.

Third, operators should be cognizant of how the people or organizations owed local allegiance actually make decisions and facilitate actions that affect the politics and the population on the ground.

Fourth, when it comes to violence, operators need to be able to gauge the role religion plays. Religion's role in conflicts can vary greatly. We have explored it in this thesis primarily as a tool by which leaders can broaden their base of support and mobilize larger segments of a constituency to action. Leaders in Eurasia have used religion to highlight the differences between identity groups, deepening existing fissures between groups. This also serves to raise the collective consciousness of an identity group, making members more likely to fight to defend their group's ideals. Conversely, religion can also serve as a stabilizing factor, instilling and reinforcing a positive system of beliefs and values that potentially benefit a society struggling to overcome the extreme difficulties that continue to plague the majority of the new Eurasian republics. This shall not be forgotten.

As a consequence, operators must be able to distinguish between those religious factors that actually produce friction and those that merely give the appearance of doing so.

I highlight this last point in particular because the current Uzbek regime, to its peril, appears to be making this exact mistake. The regime's response to isolated attacks by Wahabbi terrorists has resulted in

a campaign of dogmatic repression of everyday Islamic traditions and practices that may, in the near future, cause normally pragmatic Islamic adherents to radicalize, sending Uzbekistan and most likely the rest of Central Asia into turmoil.

Islam is, without question, a powerful force in Eurasia, and throughout much of the world. Muslims in the Caucasus and Central Asia will continue to pursue their Muslim traditions as they construct their national identities. Adherence to Islam, with its inherently good system of values and unifying traditions, may actually help bring stability and calm to these new and still very volatile republics. The myopic viewpoint that everything Islamic must be suppressed as violent and radical in nature is clearly obstructive to the "West's" stated goals of supporting democratic ideals and economic prosperity across the region. Only by truly understanding the full range of extant fissures, and the complex nature of differences on the ground, at the grass roots level, will it be possible to understand the uses, misuses, and abuses that might be made of Islam or any other religion for that matter.

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